

TAPE INDEX

NARRATOR Enok Mortensen

INTERVIEWER Phyllis Lotz

PLACE 4th Pl. Solvang

DATE Oct. 6, 1982

TRANSCRIPT PAGE NO.	TAPE COUNTER	SUBJECT	NAMES
1	000	Introduction	Peter Mortensen
1	007	Family history	
1	014	Father	
1	022	To America	
1	033	Meets mother	
2	041	Enok born in 1902	
2	060	Older brother immigrates to America	
2	070	All the family come to America	
2	084	Cedar Rapids, and the folk school	
3	091	Coming to Solvang in 1927	
3	099	Writing books	
4	118	A church in Salinas	
4	126	Tyler, Minn. and their folk school	
4	170	A Fulbright scholarship to Denmark	
5	199	A home in Wisconsin	
5	213	Reason for coming to Solvang in 1927	
6	240	Meeting wife	
6	272	The goals of a folk school	Evald Christensen
6	292	The young people who attended	
7	316	What did Solvang like like then and who were here at that time?	Faurso Marcus Nielsen C.V. Nielsen
8	370	Could Bethania Lutheran Church have helped?	
8	397	Who were the people here then, in 1927	
9	454	Did you meet the founders of Solvang?	
9	477	Dificult times for Solvang?	
		End of Side 1, Tape 1	
		Begin Side 2, Tape 1	
10	000	Any family left?	
10	022	Reason for writing books?	
		Early years in America	
11	088	The difference in Solvang from 1928 to 1970?	
11	106	What influenced your life the most?	
		End of interview	

Interview with Enok Mortensen

Date of Interview: Oct. 6, 1982, Mortensen's Home, Solvang

Interviewer: Phyllis Lotz

Transcriber: Phyllis Lotz

Begin Tape 1, Side 1

PL: Introduction. Can you tell me something about your family history?

Mr. M: The history of my family goes back about 300 years. On my father's side someone has written a book which relates to the story of a Swedish soldier and the fight between Denmark and Sweden and how he came to Denmark. He was apparently an ancestor of our family. My father was Peter Mortensen and he was born in 1870 and was apprenticed to a shoe maker. Shoe making in those days was a art. It was a very poor living however so after he became a journeyman^{he} went to America in 1891 and he traveled to Iowa and spent some time in one of the Danish colonies there. Apparently there was a big economic depression during the early 1890's and so he went to Chicago but I know very little about this time. He was some what reluctant to talk about it. He came back to Denmark in 1894 and there he met my mother who was living in Copenhagen. My father was born in Jutland, and my mother was born on the little island of Halstong, in 1874, and she came from a large family. Her father was a custom officer at Elsenor. He was also a musician, the whole family were apparently very musical, they augmented their living by playing in orchestras and for dances. My father and mother lived in

Copenhagen and I was born there in 1902. We were also a large family of 4 boys and 4 girls. I said shoe making was a craft and art but gradually mechanization took over and it was not a very good way to making a living. My father never quite forget his experiences in America. He had had a religious awakening in Chicago when he was down and out in the slums of Chicago and secondly he was very much impressed with America and he was sure his life would be much better for all the family so all during my childhood he talked about America. My mother was not very anxious to go because she had a lot of relatives in Denmark and was very attached to them. Then however, my oldest brother who also learned the shoemaker trade, went off to America in 1912 and that drew my mother to the thought of America. Then the first World War intervened and we were cut off from any communication with America. But as soon as the war was over in 1919 my father was determined to travel to America and he sold every thing he owned. We had just enough money to buy tickets for the whole family. So we traveled by boat and came to Cedar Rapids, Iowa where my brother, by this time had a little shoe shop of his own. I had always read alot of books ever since I had learned to read and I wanted to be a poet or an author, anyway, something to do with books. I was determined to get more education. Cedar Rapids had a teachers college which I attended. First of all I met the Danish Folk School in one of the near by towns and I

have described in one of my books, "Schools for Life," that I was determined to become a Folk School teacher among the Danish Americans so I went to teachers college and got my education but by the time I was ready to become a teacher in the Folk School the schools had disappeared. They were like the Folk School here, Atterdag, in Solvang. Incidentally I taught at Atterdag, both my wife and I taught here in 1927-28. But it was so uncertain, so few students so as I had also studied theology in Des Moines, Iowa, I entered the ministry and the first call as a pastor was in Chicago at a Danish-American church. While there, this was also during a great depression I wanted to describe what happened to poor people so I wrote my first book, a volume of short stories, "My People," which describes the dejection of poor immigrants in Chicago and then a sequel, "To Choose a Country." I was determined to go back to Denmark and finally become an author but gradually I became an American and chose to stay here. I stayed in Chicago from 1929 to 1936 when we moved to Salinas, California and I served a church at Salinas and Watsonville and was there seven years. I continued my writing and wrote several books also in Danish, then in 1943 I accepted a call to a big Danish community in Tyler, Minnesota to become their pastor. I was very anxious to accept this because in addition to the congregation they had a Folk School which I had been active in for many years. I was very enthusiastic and was convinced that the

school could be reactivated. So we came there in 1943 and two years later we managed to get the school in shape so that we could begin with students. This is described in my book, "Schools for Life." We found we would have to make a re-orientation and design the courses after our old ways in America so instead of having long courses we began to have short courses and these became so popular that we had to establish more camps. These camps are still going and ever since 1946 these camps have been held. Some years later there was a festival and we were given a large book and testimonials from all those who had attended the camps all those years. Another interesting thing in my life has been in the continued association with people in Denmark. At the Folk School we often had people from Denmark visit us and one year the president of a Folk School named Askel, which is the largest of all the Folk Schools in Denmark, was our speaker. He asked me if I would like to be a guest speaker at the Askel School and of course I was very happy to accept and that lead to a long association with Askel Folk School. I was teaching there on a Fulbright Scholarship in 1956-7, I took a full year off from my church. I spoke at the Folk School on American Conditions: Cultural and Spiritual, and liked it very much. At that time I was in Des Moines, where I served in connection with Grand View College but in 1967 I again applied for a Fulbright to go to Denmark again to teach so when I received it I retired from the ministry.

I taught there from 1967-68. Then no longer having a church they asked me to stay on two more years not as a teacher but as a minister at a local prish. Well, by that time we had determined we had spent so much time in Denmark that it was now time to make up our minds to either stay in Denmark or come back to America. So we did come back in 1969 and built a little home in Wisconsin by a little lake Ward Lake, close to a community called West Denmark. It was beautiful but too isolated and we remembered our youth in lovely Solvang and so we came back to Solvang and have lived here ever since. This was sort of rambling so would you like to asked something?

FL: What brought you to Solvang in 1927?

Mr. M: I had taught in two other Folk Schools prior to coming here, both my wife and I came here in 1927 and then we got married. Incidentally while we were here in 1927-8 one of the many visitors that came to the school was a young man who had spent some time in Japan. He taught the Japanese students Agriculture and Dairying. He was very much in love with Japan and as I was going back to Denmark before getting married he suggested that I travel home by way of Japan so I sailed from San Francisco to Tokyo and then went across Siberia to Denmark. When I came back we got married. The future of the Folk School here was uncertain because there was no Danish immigration and there were very few students so having theological training I would go into the ministry and that is why we left Solvang.

PL: How did you meet your wife?

Mr. M: We met at a Danish community for young people. ~~She~~ attended the University of Minnesota. Her father was pastor in Askel, Minn. We had many of the same interests. Aside from my interests in writing I have written a tenth book, "Danish Boyhood," and I would like to present these three books to the Historical Museum Library. All my books have tended to the Danish American theme. The first ones were fiction and the last ones were of history and I have written about the Danish Lutheran Church in America but aside from writing both my wife and I have been interested in crafts and the arts. These family camps that I mentioned before, is where taught crafts, I taught wood carving and my wife taught embroidery and weaving. These were important qualities in the camps.

PL: What was the goal of the Folk School?

Mr. M: The goal was to give the young people who did not aspire toward the academic life an education. It was started in Denmark in 1844 at a time when the common people had no access to education. Only those who became lawyers, doctors, teachers got the education. The large element of the people had no access to an education opportunity and that was why these folks schools were started. They are still going strong and it is a strong influence in Denmark.

PL: When did the young people attend the school?

Mr. M: The school had a summer term of 3 months and a winter term

of 6 months and in addition they had short courses to two weeks and for all kinds of people. The older people are attending now and one of the main reasons why the Folk School exerted so much influence was that the education system of Denmark was different. Most people start school at 14 unless they start an academic career. Later these people often have an urge to get more education and they were the ones who needed to attend the Folk School. There is no grading, no exams, no certificates. It was simply the learning for the sheer enjoyment of learning.

PL: What was Solvang like in those days?

Mr. M: Evald Christensen asked us to come here to teach then. The school, Atterdag College had been founded in 1914. The school was the center of the community. When I was teaching, church services were held right in the auditorium of the school and it served a useful purpose as a center of the community. I remember that once a week girls who worked in wealthy homes in Santa Barbara would come up and spend an afternoon here at school and the boys who worked on the farms and ranches came in. The school served a purpose as bringing all the young people together and giving them sort a place where they felt at home. Unfortunately of course, it was not a financial success. In Denmark the Folk School is subsidized by the government. Here we were completely on our own. It was hard to keep the school going so it had to end which was unfortunate.

The only one that still continues is in Tyler, Minn., and that was because the local church and local congregation useds the buildings as their parish and all year that school is used. So the over-head is comparatively low. All the teaching is on a volunteer level.

PL: Could the Atterdag College have continued with the help of Bethania Lutheran Church?

Mr. M: I think it could have but there was one difficulty there, the building was a large wooden structure and perhaps it was not practical, it was called a fire trap, and perhaps it was. The one at Tyler is made of brick. I still bemoan the fact that Atterdag had to be discontinued.

PL: It is interesting that there are a few small school springing up here in the valley, working on the same concept of the Folk School. It is as though the concept has come full curcle.

Do you remeber the people here in 1927?

Mr. M: At the school we were a little community of our own and we did not associate with too many in the community but the people who came to church and to weekly meetings we did get acquainted with. I remember that we joined the choir that the Faursons had. Also the Marcus Nielsen family and the C.V. Nielsens, and we became good friends. In those days it was a different atmosphere as the town was so small. While I was here we had a Danish Days, and in those days everything was really Danish! Everything was IN Danish! We would meet down in the canyon where

there was an amphitheater where we had lectures in Danish and Danish plays and concerts. Gradually more people came from other Danish communities and it grew. We had ring writing, many Danish customs were preserved. Another man I knew was Albert Petersen, the baker, who started one of the first bakeries here. He had been a student of mine. He came as a student and then settled down here.

PL: Did you ever meet any of the three founders of Solvang?

Mr. M: I only remember Nordentof but not from here, I met him in Denmark later on. Gregersen was no longer living but Hornsyld lived here with his wife and I often visited with him and we would talk about the beginnings.

PL: Did they have a hard time establishing this community?

Mr. M: Yes, they did. Most of the people who came here were rather poor. (People have to be rich to come here now) But in those days they were poor people from other Danish communities, many of them were looking for a place where they could begin again. As I understand it the land was to be sold, they had to sell so much land in order to have the contract and that made it difficult. Gregersen was apparently the business man, a minister but very practical, more so than Nordentof who was much more of a romantic. And the climate was much better here than back east and easier to build.

End of Side 1, Tape 1

Begin Side 2, Tape 1

PL: Do you have any brothers or sister alive?

Mr. M: My older brother died many years ago but my younger brother is in the Chicago area and he is a Baptist minister and I have two sisters living, one in Tenn. and one in Iowa. We do not see each other very often. My father and mother continued to live in Cedar Falls. My mother was very anxious to go back to Denmark and she did manage one trip to Denmark to see ~~relatives~~ relatives. My father never went back and never wanted to go back. On the other hand my wife and I have been to Denmark, I don't know how many times, and we might go again this summer.

PL: Did you find it was good for your soul to write the books on your experiences?

Mr. M: Yes, I think so. It was a ~~catharsis~~ catharsis, I tried to express not only my feelings but the feelings of other immigrants that I associated with. And it is very interesting that Liberty Magazine has just published an article on me. These novels that I wrote were published in the early 1930's and it is interesting that a scholar in Norway has become interested in my books. It was an attempt to explain what happens to a young immigrant in the process of being Americanized. I hardly knew any English. It is difficult to be uprooted at 16 and come to a different country but I was determined to learn English. There was a high school in connection with the college where I

learned English. I had been apprenticed to a cabinet maker in Denmark and I had been making my own living for several years and then suddenly to be taken to America, to sit next to a 14 year old, was not too exciting but because I was determined to learn I did it and it took only a short time. I was trained as a cabinet maker and I got a job in Cedar Falls doing cabinet making. A friend of mine was working for John Deere in Waterloo and he got me a job as a pattern maker with Deere, at the foundry. I learned the art of making wood patterns for castings and it was more interesting and better pay. So I really had two kinds of crafts. Then while I went to college I worked on Saturdays and one whole summer I spent working as a pattern maker. I had put myself through school. My father continued as a shoe maker in Cedar Falls and worked right up into his 80's.

PL: You must have seen a tremendous difference in Solvang from 1927 to 1970? How did you feel about it?

Mr. M: We were delighted to see our friends here but I must admit it was rather a shock to see how Solvang had changed. I still prefer Solvang as it was in the 20's. But I realize that Solvang has become meaningful to many people but while it appears as a Danish community it is not. Old Solvang which did not look like a Danish town was in reality, one.

PL: What or who influenced you most in your life?

Mr. M: No doubt the course of my life has been guided by my

reading. As a child as had the public library and I read novels and history, poetry, and all the grat works. As I look back that had a tremendous influence on my life. And thats why I wanted to enter into the world of books. The Folk School leaders influenced me a great deal and I will not forget one of them, he was Huey Miller, who was a pastor here. He was a very unusual character, excentric in many ways but he was deeply spiritual and had great ideals and he perhaps influenced me more than any one else. When I first met him he had a Folk School in ? but when he got older he came to Solvang and served the church here, then retired.

During my school days and learning to speak English, I remember I had gotten so far ahead of my class that I was tutoring some of them and I had them write out ten sentences as practice. One student came in with his paper and every sentence was wrong. I pointed this out to him and he said, but I got it from the book. What he had were ten sentences that were wrong that had to be corrected but he had copied them as though they were correct. After that I had no trouble with the class.

I wrote a book while we lived in Salinas, writing it in Danish and then in English and just lately I have rewritten it in Danish and I am hopeful that it will soon be published

PL: Thank you, Mr. Mortensen for this interview.